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NIELE TORONI
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Niele Toroni, *25 Paintings*, 1987, acrylic on twenty-five canvases. Installation view, Swiss Institute, 2015.

***CHUTES*, 2000,** a little-known work by legendary Swiss artist Niele Toroni, consists of four pennant-like fragments of blue, red, pink, and black paper marked according to the method he adopted in 1966: by pressing the bristles of a no. 50 brush—first one side, then the other—to a given support to produce squarish daubs of color (in this case, orange) at regular thirty-centimeter intervals. In the original French, the title suggests the shapes are the material scraps or cast-off bits of something else, but in the hands of a painter famously prone to puns, it also begs for other, less literal readings, having to do with the artist's larger conception of his enterprise—indeed, with the very possibilities and impossibilities of painting today. Toroni, who works across a broad range of support types of equally varied dimensions, has long refused the notion of an "ideal format," as he also eschews that of the masterpiece; what matters, he suggests, is the coherence of the practice as such: "There is 'the whole of the work' [*tout de travail*], of which one sees parts, cuts," he notes in a 1988 interview with Catherine Lawless. His painted *Chutes* are the *chutes* of painting: indices of what remains to be done, what remains to be seen, when the summary picture no longer compels conviction.

Toroni's relationship to tradition has always been complex. Born in Muralto, Switzerland, in 1937, and active in Paris since 1959, he came to public attention over the course of 1967, when he collaborated with his generational peers Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, and Michel Parmentier on a succession of now-infamous "manifestations" at some of the French capital's most prominent institutions and exhibitions. Their shared commitment to the strict repetition of highly reduced, notionally neutral traces—marks cut free, as their collectively authored tracts had it, of the traditional imperatives to represent, express, or describe either external objects or internal states—has long been seen as a radical affront to traditional models of painterly subjectivity, and the four men are often charged with liquidating the medium as such. Yet as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has noted, Toroni in many ways remains a "traditional painter": He restricts himself to time-honored constituents (a flat support and paint) and technical means (a paintbrush), and always makes the imprints himself. American audiences, at any rate, have had few opportunities to judge for themselves. Despite the near-mythical status now accorded to "BMPT" (an after-the-fact designation disdained by the artists themselves), Toroni's work has been frequently cited but rarely shown.

Two recent exhibitions in New York therefore constituted an event. At the Swiss Institute, where I encountered *Chutes*, assistant curator Clément Delépine mounted the painter's first institutional show in the city (as well as his first in the US in over twenty-five years), spanning nearly five decades of imprints on diverse supports, while the Marian Goodman Gallery offered a complementary presentation of his practice from the late 1980s to the present—his fifth solo show at that site since 1989, but his first since 2003. Both exhibitions were small by design: The former included only seven works, while the latter comprised thirteen. Yet these tightly focused surveys afforded refreshingly nuanced views of Toroni's practice, illuminating a method at once steeped in history and critically attuned to the varied and ephemeral conditions in which it becomes manifest.

The Swiss Institute show was divided between two ground-floor rooms. In the lobby, in addition to *Chutes*, were three new interventions, all produced in situ. These works underscored Toroni's continued attachment to prior artistic conventions: Two of them—a trio of white impressions on a single pane of the glass exterior wall, and a half-dozen blue imprints on the electrical-panel door (their color derived, it seems, from the security keypad just above)—adopted found rectangular frames, while the third, a triangular configuration of black traces atop the entrance to the main gallery, recalled the classical tradition of the pediment. Yet they also showed Toroni attempting to "neutralize" art's past. The traces are shorn of talent, while their overall constellations, generously spaced by the intervals that are as integral to the method as the imprints, discreetly alter but do not cover the decidedly banal found environment.

Whereas the site-specific works in the lobby alluded to the ongoing pertinence of a broader artistic heritage, three site-adapted works in the main gallery helped to clarify Toroni's relation to one historical crux in particular: the emergence of American Minimalism. Here, arranged clockwise from the entrance, was a 1987 work composed of twenty-five stretched canvases in a continuous line, installed at such a height as to transition seamlessly from hanging on the west, north, and east walls to resting directly on the platform that runs the length of the room's southern perimeter. Suspended from the wall above the dais was a waxed canvas from 1968 (the oldest work in the show), displayed with a portion of its length running across the platform and the remainder rolled. Finally, for a 2014 work on the west wall, seven sheets of letter paper were tacked along their upper edges to a wooden bar and left to hang freely. The 1968 painting—a work one imagines deeply impressed the artists of the soon-to-emerge Supports/Surfaces group—establishes Toroni's early interest both in the literal heft of canvas cut free of the traditional stretcher and in the contingency of painting's visibility in the exhibition space (the amount of surface on view necessarily changes from one venue to the next, according to wall height and traffic patterns), while the multipart formats of the later works underscore the serial nature of the traces that traverse them. Toroni's refusal of pictorial illusionism in favor of a marked engagement with "real" space clearly resonates with developments in New York, as does his use of repetitive, nonhierarchical configurations. And yet Toroni remains no less attached to painting. Whether hanging or leaning, all three works retain a strong relationship to the wall, as they continue to be rigorously frontal—surfaces subjected to a certain play of spacing, rather than objects with inaccessible interiors. (There is nothing of the Minimalist "hollowness" so famously denounced by Michael Fried.) Not least, they are palpably marked by hand: Toroni's imprints are variable, as are the graphite *X*'s intermittently visible beneath them. His neutrality, such details make clear, is always keyed to a particular kind of action—minimized *gestures*, not just minimal forms—and cannot happen apart from the real-time labor of making. This methodical process appears a deliberately reduced response to the Rosenbergian rhetoric of "action painting" (a discourse still very much in force in France in these years), even as the dogged iteration of Toroni's mute, dumb marks can equally tip, as critics have noted, into quasi-Beckettian absurdity—the "I can't go on, I'll go on" of postwar painting.

The showing at Marian Goodman's third-floor gallery further emphasized the continued importance of the act of painting. While this exhibition, too, included a new intervention in the first room—a diamond-shaped arrangement of black imprints—it was otherwise structured according to a basic numerical logic: A trio of trios in the opening space (three new paintings on canvas from 2015, as well as one set each on paper and newspaper, both from 1991) was followed by a pair of pairs in the second, smaller room (two shaped canvases from 1996 and two paintings on paper from 1989). Whereas the primary colors of the trio on paper inevitably recalled earlier "endings" and "beginnings" in the history of art—one might think of Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*, 1921, as well as Piet Mondrian's and Bart van der Leck's slightly prior recourse to the basic building blocks of color—the paired pairings brought us back to the basic material reversals and repetitions of Toroni's present-day endeavors to "elementarize" action (to borrow Yve-Alain Bois's term), beginning with the double stroke of the brush that makes up each mark. The history of painting recedes and recommences with every touch.

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